Caste Problem in India
Swami Vivekananda

Though our castes and our institutions are apparently linked with our religion, they are not so. These institutions have been necessary to protect us as a nation, and when this necessity for self-preservation will no more exist, they will die a natural death. In religion there is no caste. A man from the highest caste and a man from the lowest may become a monk in India and the two castes become equal. The caste system is opposed to the religion of Vedanta.

Caste is a social custom, and all our great preachers have tried to break it down. From Buddhism downwards, every sect has preached against caste, and every time it has only riveted the chains. Beginning from Buddha to Rammohan Ray, everyone made the mistake of holding caste to be a religious institution and tried to pull down religion and caste altogether, and failed.

In spite of all the ravings of the priests, caste is simply a crystallized social institution, which after doing its service is now filling the atmosphere of India with its stench, and it can only be removed by giving back to people their lost social individuality. Caste is simply the outgrowth of the political institutions of India; it is a hereditary trade guild. Trade competition with Europe has broken caste more than any teaching.

The older I grow, the better I seem to think of caste and such other time-honored institutions of India. There was a time when I used to think that many of them were useless and worthless, but the older I grow, the more I seem to feel a difference in cursing any one of them, for each one of them is the embodiment of the experience of centuries.

A child of but yesterday, destined to die the day after tomorrow, comes to me and asks me to change all my plans and if I hear the advice of that baby and change all my surroundings according to his ideas I myself should be a fool, and no one else. Much of the advice that is coming to us from different countries is similar to this. Tell these wiseacres, "I will hear you when you have made a stable society yourselves. You cannot hold on to one idea for two days, you quarrel and fail; you are born like moths in the spring and die like them in five minutes. You come up like bubbles and burst like bubbles too. First form a stable society like ours. First make laws and institutions that remains undiminished in their power through scores of centuries. Then will be the time to talk on the subject with you, but till then, my friend, you are only a giddy child."

Caste is a very good thing. Caste is the plan we want to follow. What caste really is, not one in a million understands. There is no country in the world without caste. Caste is based throughout on that principle. The plan in India is to make everybody Brahmana, the Brahmana being the ideal of humanity. If you read the history of

India you will find that attempts have always been made to raise the lower classes. Many are the classes that have been raised. Many more will follow till the whole will become Brahmana. That is the plan.

Our ideal is the Brahmana of spiritual culture and renunciation. By the Brahmana ideal what do I mean? I mean the ideal Brahmana-ness in which worldliness is altogether absent and true wisdom is abundantly present. That is the ideal of the Hindu race. Have you not heard how it is declared he, the Brahmana, is not amenable to law, that he has no law, that he is not governed by kings, and that his body cannot be hurt? That is perfectly true. Do not understand it in the light thrown upon it by interested and ignorant fools, but understand it in the light of the true and original Vedantic conception.. If the Brahmana is he who has killed all selfishness and who lives to acquire and propagate wisdom and the power of love - if a country is altogether inhabited by such Brahmanas, by men and women who are spiritual and moral and good, is it strange to think of that country as being above and beyond all law? What police, what Military are necessary to govern them? Why should any one govern them at all? Why should they live under a government? They are good and noble, and they are the men of God; these are our ideal Brahmanas, and we read that in the SatyaYuga there was only one caste, and that was the Brahmana. We read in the Mahabharata that the whole world was in the beginning peopled with Brahmanas, and that as they began to degenerate they became divided into different castes, and that when the cycle turns round they will all go back to that Brahmanical origin.

The son of a Brahmana is not necessarily always a Brahmana; though there is every possibility of his being one, he may not become so. The Brahmana caste and the Brahmana quality are two distinct things.

As there are sattva, rajas and tamas - one or other of these gunas more or less - in every man, so the qualities which make a Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya or a Shudra are inherent in every man, more or less. But at time one or other of these qualities predominates in him in varying degrees and is manifested accordingly. Take a man in his different pursuits, for example : when he is engaged in serving another for pay, he is in Shudra-hood; when he is busy transacting some some piece of business for profit, on his account, he is a Vaishya; when he fights to right wrongs then the qualities of a Kshatriya come out in him; and when he meditates on God, or passes his time in conversation about Him, then he is a Brahmana. Naturally, it is quite possible for one to be changed from one caste into another. Otherwise,
how did Viswamitra become a Brahmana and Parashurama a Kshatriya?

The means of European civilization is the sword; of the Aryans, the division into different varnas. This system of division into varnas is the stepping-stone to civilization, making one rise higher and higher in proportion to one's learning and culture. In Europe, it is everywhere victory to the strong and death to the weak. In the land of Bharata (India), every social rule is for the protection of the weak.

Such is our ideal of caste, as meant for raising all humanity slowly and gently

towards the realization of the great ideal of spiritual man, who is non-resisting, calm, steady, worshipful, pure and meditative. In that ideal there is God.

We believe in Indian caste as one of the greatest social institutions that the Lord gave to man. We also believe that through the unavoidable defects, foreign persecutions, and above all, the monumental ignorance and pride of many Brahmanas who do not deserve the name, have thwarted in many ways, the legitimate fructification of this glorious Indian institution, it has already worked wonders for the land of Bharata and it destined to lead Indian humanity to its goal.

Caste should not go; but should be readjusted occasionally. Within the old structure is to be life enough for the building of two hundred thousand new ones. It is sheer nonsense to desire the abolition of caste.

It is in the nature of society to form itself into groups; and what will go will be these privileges! Caste is a natural order. I can perform one duty in social life, and you another; you can govern a country, and I can mend a pair of old shoes, but that is no reason why you are greater than I, for can you mend my shoes? Can I govern the country? I am clever in mending shoes, you are clever in reading Vedas, that is no reason why you should trample on my head; why if one commits murder should he be praised and if another steals an apple why should he be hanged? This will have to go.

Caste is good. That is only natural way of solving life. Men must form themselves into groups, and you cannot get rid of that. Wherever you go there will be caste. But that does not mean that there should be these privileges. They should be knocked on the head. If you teach Vedanta to the fisherman, he will say, "I am as good a man as you, I am a fisherman, you are a philosopher, but I have the same God in me, as you have in you." And that is what we want, no privilege for anyone, equal chances for all; let everyone be taught that the Divine is within, and everyone will work out his own salvation. The days of exclusive privileges and exclusive claims are gone, gone for ever from the soil of India.

Formerly the characteristic of the noble-minded was - (tribhuvanamupakara shrenibhih priyamanah) "to please the whole universe by one's numerous acts of service", but now it is - I am pure and the whole world is impure. "Don't touch me!" "Don't touch me!" The whole world is impure, and I alone am pure! Lucid Brahmajnana! Bravo! Great God! Nowadays, Brahman is neither in the recesses of the heart, nor in the highest heaven, nor in all beings - now He is in the cooking pot!

We are orthodox Hindus, but we refuse entirely to identify ourselves with "Don't-touchism". That is not Hinduism; it is in none of our books; it is an orthodox superstition, which has interfered with national efficiency all along the line. Religion has entered in the cooking pot. The present religion of the Hindus is neither the path of Knowledge or Reason - it is "Don't-touchism". - "Don't touch me", "Don't touch me" - that exhausts its description.

"Don't touchism" is a form of mental disease. Beware! All expansion is life, all

contraction is death. All love is expansion, all selfishness is contraction. Love is therefore the only law of life. See that you do not lose your lives in this dire irreligion of "Don't- touchism". Must the teaching (Atmavat sarvabhuteshu) - "Looking upon all beings as your own self" - be confined to books alone? How will they grant salvation who cannot feed a hungry mouth with a crumb of bread? How will those, who become impure at the mere breath of others, purify others?

We must cease to tyrannize. To what a ludicrous state are we brought! If a bhangi comes to anybody as a bhangi, he would be shunned as the plague; but no sooner does he get a cupful of water poured upon his head with some muttering of prayers by a padri, and get a coat to his back, no matter how threadbare, and come into the room of the most orthodox Hindu, I don't see the man who then dare refuse him a chair and a hearty shake of hands! Irony can go no farther.

Just see, for want of sympathy from the Hindus, thousands of pariahs in Madras are turning Christians. Don't think that this is simply due to the pinch of hunger; it is because they do not get any sympathy from us. We are day and night calling out to them "Don't touch us! Don't touch us!" Is there any compassion or kindliness of heart in the country? Only a class of "Don't-touchists" ; kick such customs out! I sometimes feel the urge to break the barriers of "Don't-touchism", go at once and call out, "Come all who are poor, miserable, wretched and downtrodden", and to bring them all together. Unless they rise, the Mother will not awake.

Each Hindu, I say, is a brother to every other, and it is we, who have degraded them by our outcry, "Don't touch", "Don't touch!" And so the whole country has been plunged to the utmost depths of meanness, cowardice and ignorance. These men have to be lifted; words of hope and faith have to be proclaimed to them. We have to tell them, "You are also men like us and you have all the rights that we have."

Our solution of the caste question is not degrading those who are already high up, is not running amuck through food and drink, is not jumping out of our own limits in order to have more enjoyment, but it comes by every one of us fulfilling the dictates of our Vedantic religion, by our attaining spirituality and by our becoming ideal Brahmana. There is a law laid on each one of you in this land by your ancestors, whether you are Aryans, or non-Aryans, rishis or Brahmanas or the very lowest outcaste. The command is the same to you all, that you must make progress without stopping, and that from the highest man to the lowest pariah, every one in this country has to try and become the ideal Brahmana. This Vedantic idea is applicable not only here but over the whole world.

The Brahmana-hood is the ideal of humanity in India as wonderfully put forward by Shankaracharya at the beginning of his commentary on the Gita, where he speaks about the reason for Krishna's coming as a preacher for the preservation of Brahmana- hood, of Brahmana-ness. That was the great end. This Brahmana, the man of God, he who has known Brahman, the ideal man, the perfect man, must remain, he must not go. And with all the defects of the caste now, we know that we must all be ready to give to the Brahmanas this credit, that from them have come

more men with real Brahmana-ness in them than from all the other castes. We must be bold enough, must be brave enough to speak their defects, but at the same time we must give credit that is due to them.

Therefore, it is no use fighting among the castes. What good will it do? It will divide us all the more, weaken us all the more, degrade us all the more. The solution is not by bringing down the higher, but by raising the lower up to the level of the higher. And that is the line of work that is found in all our books, in spite of what you may hear from some people whose knowledge of their own Scriptures and whose capacity to understand the mighty plans of the ancients are only zero. What is the plan? The ideal at the one end is the Brahmana and the ideal at the other end is the chandala, and the whole work is to raise the chandala up to the Brahmana. Slowly and slowly you will find more and more privileges granted to them.

I regret that in modern times there should be so much discussion between the castes. This must stop. It is useless on both sides, especially on the side of the higher caste, the Brahmana, the day for these privileges and exclusive claims is gone. The duty of every aristocracy is to dig its own grave, and the sooner it does so, the better. The more he delays, the more it will fester and the worse death it will die. It is the duty of the Brahmana, therefore, to work for the salvation of the rest of mankind, in India. If he does that and so long as he does that, he is a Brahmana.

Any one who claims to be a Brahmana, then, should prove his pretensions, first by manifesting that spirituality, and next by raising others to the same status. We earnestly entreat the Brahmanas not to forget the ideal of India - the production of a universe of Brahmanas, pure as purity, good as God Himself : this was at the beginning, says the Mahabharata and so will it be in the end.

It seems that most of the Brahmanas are only nursing a false pride of birth; and any schemer, native or foreign, who can pander to this vanity and inherent laziness, by fulsome sophistry, appears to satisfy more.

Beware Brahmanas, this is the sign of death! Arise and show your manhood, your Brahmana-hood, by raising the non-Brahmanas around you - not in the spirit of a master - not with the rotten canker of egoism crawling with superstitions and charlatanry of East and West - but in the spirit of a servant.

To the Brahmanas I appeal, that they must work hard to raise the Indian people by teaching them what they know, by giving out the culture that they have accumulated for centuries. It is clearly the duty of the Brahmanas of India to remember what real Brahmana-hood is. As Manu says, all these privileges and honors are given to the Brahmana because, "with him is the treasury of virtue". He must open that treasury and distribute to the world.

It is true that he was the earliest preacher to the Indian races, he was the first to renounce everything in order to attain to the higher realization of life, before others

could reach to the idea. It was not his fault that he marched ahead of the other castes. Why did not the other castes so understand and do as they did? Why did they sit down and be lazy, and let the Brahmanas win the race?

But it is one thing to gain an advantage, and another thing to preserve it for evil use. Whenever power is used for evil it becomes diabolical; it must be used for good only. So this accumulated culture of ages of which the Brahmana has been the trustee, he must now give to the people, and it was because he did not open this treasury to the people, that the Muslims invasion was possible. It was because he did not open this treasury to the people from the beginning, that for a thousand years we have been trodden under the heels of everyone who chose to come to India; it was through that we have become degraded, and the first task must be to break open the cells that hide the wonderful treasures which our common ancestors accumulated; bring them out, and give them to everybody, and the Brahmana must be the first to do it. There is an old superstition in Bengal that if the cobra that bites, sucks out his own poison from the patient, the man must survive. Well then, the Brahmana must suck out his own poison.

To the non-Brahmana castes I say, wait, be not in a hurry. Do not seize every opportunity of fighting the Brahmana, because as I have shown; you are suffering from your own fault. Who told you to neglect spirituality and Sanskrit learning? What have you been doing all this time? Why have you been indifferent? Why do you now fret and fume because somebody else had more brains, more energy, more pluck and go than you? Instead of wasting your energies in vain discussions and quarrels in the newspapers, instead of fighting and quarreling in your own homes - which is sinful - use all your energies in acquiring the culture which the Brahmana has, and the thing is done. Why do you not become Sanskrit scholars? Why do you not spend millions to bring Sanskrit education to all the castes of India? That is the question. The moment you do these things, you are equal to the Brahmana! That is the secret power in India.

The only safety, I tell you men who belong to the lower castes, the only way to raise your condition is to study Sanskrit, and this fighting and writing and frothing against the higher castes is in vain, it does no good, and it creates fight and quarrel, and this race, unfortunately already divided, is going to be divided more and more. The only way to bring about the leveling of castes is to appropriate the culture, the education which is the strength of the higher castes.

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